

"KEEP YOUR MOUTH SHUT."

A STARTLING NEW TREATISE—INDIAN PHYSIOLOGICAL WISDOM—DANGERS OF SLEEPING WITH THE MOUTH OPEN—HOW TO EFFECT A REFORM.

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"Shut Your Mouth" is the emphatic and not over-polite injunction which is made conspicuous on the cover of a singular volume by George Catlin. He has during all of a long life pursued the study of ethnography among the native races of North and South America; has described them with rare fidelity; has painted hundreds of representative savages more faithfully than any other man, and has paid particular attention to their sanitary system.

One thing at least he has learned from these children of nature, and that is the immense importance of keeping one's mouth shut. In a general sense we all recognize this fact theoretically. Mr. Catlin, however, restricts his observations to the physiological advantages of shutting the mouth, particularly during sleep, and brings out some startling truths. He says:

"There is no animal in nature, excepting man, that sleeps with the mouth open; and with mankind I believe the habit, which is not natural, is generally confined to civilized communities, where he is nurtured and raised amidst enervating luxuries and unnatural warmth, where the habit is easily contracted, but carried and practiced with great danger to life in different latitudes and different climates; and in sudden changes of temperature, even in his own house.

"The physical conformation of a man alone affords sufficient proof that this is a habit against instinct and that he was made, like other animals, to sleep with his mouth shut—supplying the lungs with vital air through the nostrils, the natural channels; and a strong corroboration of this fact is to be met with amongst the North American Indians, who strictly adhere to Nature's law in this respect, and show the beneficial results in their fine and manly forms, and in exemption from mental and physical diseases."

And in another place:—

"It requires no more than common sense to perceive that mankind, like all the brute creations, should close their mouths when they close their eyes in sleep, and breathe through their nostrils, which were evidently made for that purpose, instead of dropping the under jaw, and drawing an over-draught of cold air directly on the lungs through the mouth; and that in the middle of the night, when the fires have gone down and the air is at its coolest temperature—the system at rest and the lungs the least able to withstand the shock.

"For those who have suffered with weakness of the lungs or other diseases of the chest, there needs no proof of this fact; and of those, if any, who are yet incredulous, it only requires that they should take a candle in their hand and look at their friends asleep and snoring; or, with the night-mare, (or without it,) with their eyes shut and with their mouths wide open—the very picture of distress, of suffering, of idiocy and death; when Nature designed that they should be smiling in the soothing and invigorating forgetfulness of the fatigues and anxieties of the day, which are dissolving into pleasurable and dreamy shadows of realities gone by."

He holds "that the air which enters the lungs is as different from that which enters the nostrils as distilled water is different from the water in an ordinary cistern or frog-pond. The arresting and purifying process of the nose upon the atmosphere with its poisonous ingredients passing through it, though less perceptible, is not less distinct, nor less important than that of the mouth, which stops cherry-stones and fish-bones from entering the stomach.

"When awake man can breathe through the mouth with comparative impunity, but when he relaxes all of his energies in the repose of sleep, and his powers of resistance are giving away to its quieting influence, if he gradually opens his mouth to the widest strain he lets the enemy in that chills his lungs—that racks his brain—that paralyzes his stomach—that gives him the night-mare—brings him imps and furies that dance before him during the night; and during the following day headache, toothache, rheumatism, dyspepsia and the gout."

The author thus gives his own experience :

"I had been, like too many of the world, too tenderly caressed in my infancy and childhood by the over-kindness of an affectionate mother, without cruelty of thoughtfulness enough to compel me to close my mouth in my sleeping hours ; and who, through my boyhood, thinking that while I was asleep I was doing well enough, allowed me to grow up under that abominable custom of sleeping much of the time with the mouth wide open ; and which practice I thoughtlessly carried into manhood, with night-mare and snoring, and its other results ; and at last, (as I discovered just in time to save my life,) to the banks of the Missouri, where I was nightly drawing the deadly draughts of cold air, with all its poisonous malaria, through my mouth in my lungs. Waking many times during the night, and finding myself in this painful condition, and suffering the succeeding day with inflammation (and sometimes bleeding) of the lungs, I became fully convinced of the danger of the habit, and resolved to overcome it, which I eventually did, only by sternness of resolution and perseverance, determining through the day to keep my teeth and my lips firmly closed, except when it was necessary to open them ; and strengthening this determination, as a matter of life and death, at the last moment of consciousness, while entering into sleep.

"Under this unyielding determination, and the relief I began to feel from a partial correction of the habit, I was encouraged to continue in the unrelaxed application of my remedy, until I at length completely conquered an insidious enemy that was nightly attacking me in my helpless position, and evidently fast hurrying me to the grave. * * * * *

"Finding myself so evidently relieved from the painful and alarming results of a habit which I had recollected to have been brought from my boyhood, I became forcibly struck with the custom I had often observed (and to which I had before alluded, of the Indian women pressing together the lips of their sleeping infants, for which I could not, at first, imagine the motive, but which was now suggested to me in a manner which I could not misunderstand ; and appealing to them for the object of so, apparently, cruel a mode, I was soon made to understand, both by their women and their medicine-men, that it was done "to insure their good looks and prolong their lives ;" and by looking into their communities, and contrasting their sanitary condition with the bills of mortality among the civilized races, I am ready to admit the justness of their reply, and am fully convinced of the advantages those ignorant races have over us in this respect, not from being ahead of us, but from being behind us, and consequently not so far departed from Nature's wise and provident regulations as to lose the benefit of them.

"We wish we could give the amusing wood-cut illustrations which add to the impressiveness of the following :

"Watch your little brothers and sisters, or little innocent playfellows, when asleep with their mouths strained open, and observe the painful expressions of their faces, their nervous agitation, the unusual beating of their hearts, the twitching of their flesh and the cords of their necks and throats, and your own reason will tell you that they do not enjoy such sleep. And, on the other hand, what pictures of innocence and enjoyment are those who are quietly sleeping with their mouths firmly shut and their teeth closed, smiling as they are enjoying their natural repose ? If you will, for a few moments, shut your eyes and let your under jaw fall down, as it sometimes does in your sleep, you will soon see how painful the over draft of cold air on the lungs becomes, even in the day-time, when all your energies are in action to relieve you, and you will instantly perceive the mischief that such a mode of breathing might do in the night, when every muscle and nerve in your body is relaxed and seeking repose, and the chill of the midnight air is increasing.

"It is most undoubtedly the above named habit which produces confirmed snorers, and also consumption of the lungs and many other diseases, as well as premature decay of the teeth, the night-mare, etc., from which it has been shown the savage races are chiefly exempt, and, I firmly believe, from the fact that they always sleep with their mouths closed and their teeth together, as I have before described.